

# PREACHING IN THE CONTEXT OF THE EUCHARIST

## A Patristic Perspective

Jeremy Driscoll, O.S.B.

The earliest testimony we have of preaching at the Eucharist is from the Acts of the Apostles, and the account reports considerable excitement. "On the first day of the week when we gathered to break bread, Paul spoke to them because he was going to leave on the next day, and he kept on speaking until midnight. There were many lamps in the upstairs room where we were gathered, and a young man named Eutychus who was sitting on the window sill was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. Once overcome by sleep, he fell down from the third story and when he was picked up, he was dead." The rest is known. Paul brings him back to life, and then we read, "Then he returned upstairs, broke the bread, and ate; after a long conversation that lasted until daybreak, he departed" (Acts 20: 7-12). There are lessons about preaching in this—for example, going on and on can kill a man—but I cite it not for that reason but more as a primitive account of the same topic I am addressing in this study; namely, that the celebration of the community's Eucharist is both preceded and followed by talk. Here we will ask what kind of talk? What kind of preaching? Classic is the account of Justin Martyr at least a hundred years later, where he describes the practice of the community's Sunday Eucharist.

*Jeremy Driscoll, O.S.B., Pontificio Ateneo S. Anselmo, Rome; Mount Angel Abbey and Seminary, St. Benedict, OR 97373*

1. The first answer to this is given, together with its context in Acts 2: 42: "They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers."

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Describing the lives in cities or memoirs of the long as time per discourse instru Then he goes on again: Eucharist content of the p gives an exhortat and prophets. C accomplish: the ; tion of how we that are read wh In the liturgical r with a new lecti weekday euchar through all sorts bishops, priests, ; selves responsible This is certainly ; ture for the Cath Nonetheless, few of connection bet the Eucharist w more, concentrat loss of much pre sleep as Paul talk on and on. Once overcome by sleep, he fell down from the third story and when he was picked up, he was dead." The rest is known. Paul brings him back to life, and then we read, "Then he returned upstairs, broke the bread, and ate; after a long conversation that lasted until daybreak, he departed" (Acts 20: 7-12). There are lessons about preaching in this—for example, going on and on can kill a man—but I cite it not for that reason but more as a primitive account of the same topic I am addressing in this study; namely, that the celebration of the community's Eucharist is both preceded and followed by talk. Here we will ask what kind of talk? What kind of preaching? Classic is the account of Justin Martyr at least a hundred years later, where he describes the practice of the community's Sunday Eucharist.

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A THEOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION OF THE FOUNDATIONS  
OF PREACHING

Even though Christian preaching relied on rabbinical and hellenistic precedents, in its essence it was a new phenomenon in the ancient world. Its newness corresponds to the newness of the Christian message. In the same way that the Gospels are a new literary genre conformed to the need of professing faith by telling the story of Jesus, so Christian preaching became a new way of public speaking precisely because its message was altogether new: the incarnation of the Son of God, his death and his resurrection.<sup>3</sup>

Christian preaching derives from the Lord himself, more precisely, from his resurrection. "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt 28: 19-20). Making disciples, teaching what comes from the Lord—this is the task of preaching. Theologically this is important. Preaching is not the initiative of the church but of the risen Lord, who said in this same context, "And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age." In Mark's gospel we are told that this presence of the risen Lord confirms preaching: "They went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs" (Mark 16:20).

This commission to preach, which the apostles received from the Lord, parallels the Lord's own receiving of his mission from the Father: "The risen Lord says to his disciples, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20: 21). This "as" and "so" express a huge mystery; indeed, nothing less than an echo of the trinitarian mystery in which the Son comes forth from the Father. In that same way, from those same mysterious depths, the apostolic preacher comes forth from the risen Lord. Thus, the pattern according to which the Lord preached must become the pattern of every Christian preacher. Jesus expressed that pattern precisely: "My teaching is not my own but is from the one who sent me" (John 7: 16). Even so, there is a difference in kind between the preaching of Jesus and the preaching of the apostles. Jesus, though bearing testimony to the Father, also bears testimony to himself.<sup>4</sup> The apostles for their part bear testimony not to themselves but to Jesus. He indeed becomes the

3. For the theological significance of the newness of the Gospel genre, see R. Latourelle, "Gospel as Literary Genre," in *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, eds. R. Latourelle and R. Fischella (New York 1994), pp. 368-71. The newness of Christian preaching is something that emerges again and again in the exhaustive study of patristic preaching by A. Olibar, *La predicación cristiana antigua* (Barcelona: Herder, 1991). To my knowledge this is the best single work on patristic preaching.  
4. Luke 4: 21; John 3: 11; 5: 31-47; 8: 14-18; 10: 25; 15: 26; 1 Tim 6: 13; 1 John 5: 7-8.



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what dense. But I am trying to offer here a theological understanding

of preaching the Eucharist and not merely a how-to-preach workshop.

Nevertheless, once understood theologically, preaching these things is

not as difficult as following the theological discussion as to why it works;

for the sacraments or figures—biblical and liturgical—have their own

11. Rom 6: 10; Heb 7: 27; 9: 12. For further discussion of this, see E. Mazza, *The Celebration of the Eucharist. The Origin of the Rite and the Development of Its Interpretation*, tr. M. O'Connell (Collegeville: 1999), p. 120. Mazza is speaking of the Latin tradition as represented in Tertullian. For the same as unfolding in the Alexandrian tradition, see B. Studer, "Die doppelte Exegese bei Origenes" in *Mysterium Cantatis, Studien zur Exegese und zur Trinitätslehre in der Alten Kirche* (Rome: 1999), pp. 37-66. For useful summaries of Tertullian and Cyprian on these questions, see J. D. Lawrence, "Priest as Type of Christ, The Leader of the Eucharist in Salvation History according to Cyprian of Carthage" (New York: Peter Lang, 1984), pp. 63-72, 75-86.

The Fathers were keen to strike a balance between identity and difference in their talk about these things. The mighty action of God in the concrete historical death of Christ is a unique reality which happened once and for all. "But in virtue of the resurrection, what happened once in one place is made available in every time and place through figures, sacraments, types. These correspond on the deepest ontological level to the central event; they are for that reason "communion" in that event (again, 1 Cor 10: 16). We have thus a middle term between ourselves and the events of the Paschal Mystery. We have a sacrament between ourselves and that. A sacrament is a sacrament of: a sacrament of the Paschal Mystery. In preaching, explaining how events of the Old Testament are also figures, shadows, types) becomes the basis for explaining in preaching how bread and wine and the assembly that communes in these are also sacraments of Christ. The way I am putting this is perhaps complicated, or at least somewhat dense. But I am trying to offer here a theological understanding of preaching the Eucharist and not merely a how-to-preach workshop. Nevertheless, once understood theologically, preaching these things is not as difficult as following the theological discussion as to why it works; for the sacraments or figures—biblical and liturgical—have their own power to work on the mind and heart. It is enough for the preacher to

that there was something hidden in the biblical text (called, for example, the mystery of the text), so too there was something hidden in the liturgy, in the bread and the wine and the actions around them. For the same reason, then, these too were called mysteries, or sacraments, or figures. Something very profound is expressed in this transfer of terminology. It is not simply a question of seeing that interpretive tools in one field will also work in another. Rather, some deep relation is intuited between the biblical events attested to in Scripture and the signs and actions of the liturgy. A theology is achieved in the biblical text as a whole when read with the eyes of Christian faith and in a typological key. From this whole biblical world there emerge also symbols and ritual actions which correspond to the same theological understanding. Every type—biblical or liturgical—points to Christ in his Paschal Mystery; and so every type—biblical or liturgical—precisely because it is a type, ontologically participates in the one event which encompasses them all.

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